



For many in New Orleans, you've finally got mail

Delivery, however, is another story

by Michelle Hunter
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As power, water, telephone and Internet service slowly return to the east bank of New Orleans, so, too, does the mail.

Residents and business owners from Uptown, the Carrollton area and portions of the Central Business District and the French Quarter may begin collecting their old mail today at two conventional post offices and a temporary trailer city near New Orleans Arena, the U.S. Postal Service said Tuesday. It hopes to make similar arrangements for the rest of the east bank by next week.

Even without full street delivery, the pickup arrangements represent a breakthrough for the Postal Service after five weeks of stockpiling mail for most of the New Orleans region first in Houston and Dallas, then in Baton Rouge, then back in Houston. During that time, first Katrina then Rita blasted the Louisiana coast, largely emptying many parishes.

"The two hurricanes put us behind the eight ball," New Orleans postmaster Alan Cousin said. The Postal Service said its Uptown Station at 2000 Louisiana Ave. and Carrollton Station at 3400 S. Carrollton Ave. will be open weekdays and Saturdays from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Mail addressed to the 70115 ZIP code will be available at the Uptown Station, and mail addressed to the 70125 area will be at the Carrollton Station, only for pickup. Post office boxes at the stations also will start receiving mail.

Because so many New Orleans letter carriers were displaced by post-Katrina flooding, street delivery on the east bank is out of the question for now, said Anthony Ruda, the Postal Service's Louisiana district manager.

Mail destined for ZIP codes 70112 and 70113 will be distributed weekdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at one of seven trailers set up in the parking lot between New Orleans Arena and the New Orleans Shopping Center parking garage on Girod Street, Cousin said.

By Tuesday, Cousin said, postal workers hope to make available mail at the same site for ZIP codes 70130, 70116 and 70119. All customers with post office boxes at the New Orleans main office, 701 Loyola Ave., may check mail Thursday at special boxes set up in the same trailers.

Mounds of mail

As more trailers are erected on the site, other New Orleans ZIP codes will be added, postal officials said. The staggered availability is designed to go along with Mayor Ray Nagin's re-entry plan for residents and business owners.

"We wanted to open up as the city opens up," said Cousins, who estimates that more than 6 1/2 million pieces of mail from the past month have been waiting to be delivered to the New Orleans area.

That's nowhere near the amount of mail normally processed in a five-week period by the main post office, which handled mail for Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles and St. Tammany parishes, as well for parts of Mississippi, Alabama and Florida, Ruda said. The main office,

which took on water in its basement, processed an average of six million to eight million letters per day.

Shortly after the storm, Ruda said, most business stopped sending bulk mail, the advertisements and credit card offers that made up almost 50 percent of the deliveries. Magazines and other periodicals have also been held. And many banks and billing institutions did not send out statements during September, he said.

For now, only first-class letters and packages will be delivered into the New Orleans region. "A lot of people think there's got to be warehouses and warehouses of mail right now," Ruda said. "That's not the case. There's just not a lot of mail coming in."

On the way

A good bit of the mail that was waiting to be delivered in September is already arriving in mailboxes.

At least partial street delivery has been returned to Algiers and Jefferson Parish. Residents of Plaquemines Parish can retrieve mail from a mobile post office at 9419 Louisiana 23 in Belle Chasse. St. Bernard mail is expected to be available at a similar mobile unit in Covington next week, Ruda said.

Though some residents have been happy to see letter carriers back on the streets, others have been grumbling about sluggish delivery and forwarded mail that has yet to arrive despite their completing change-of-address forms weeks ago.

Gail Lassere of Gretna had her mail forwarded to her sister's house in Conroe, Texas, when she and her husband hit the road to flee Katrina. But more than four weeks later, her sister hasn't received a single item for Lassere.

"I'm still looking for my mail," Lassere said while standing in line at the Gretna post office on Gretna Boulevard. "I don't know if I'll find some here or if it's just in Never Never Land." Ruda said all change-of-address forms are being processed and that the mail has been forwarded. But postal officials said the storms and the unusually high demand for mail service have slowed delivery.

After Katrina, all New Orleans area mail was routed to Houston and Dallas, where it was processed and forwarding requests were handled, Ruda said. Though a change-of-address request usually takes seven to 10 days, the surge of requests after the storm pushed things back to about three weeks.

Then, Hurricane Rita forced the Postal Service to evacuate the stockpiled mail to Baton Rouge, where it sat until it was safe to be sent back to Houston.

Postal staff shortages all over mean fewer employees to sort mail and make deliveries, said Kim Handy, a letter carrier at the Gretna post office, where the staff was still short at least 20 people Monday. Thus, street delivery routes must be juggled, and residents may receive mail once every few days instead of six days per week.

But the mail is being delivered, Handy assured.

"The key," she said, "is to be patient."